



THE MANDARIN PEEL

Tuesday, January 23, 2018 – from Jorethang to Legship (India)

(27.171998,88.297662)

Just as we are approaching Mabong, the jeep brakes sharply and stops. Three men dressed in thick, woolen jackets march towards grimly towards us; it looks as if they want to ride with us. Hell, there are already eleven people in the jeep, but the driver points to the backseat, at me. I see no way in which I can make myself even thinner than I have already done on this ride, so I just ignore his gesture and focus on the tangerine that I've just carefully peeled – a real finger feat given the cramped space in the jeep and the countless potholes in the road. But the trio outside insists. The driver then turns towards me and asks: «Did you throw something out of the window?» I finally understand: the gentlemen want to help us, they think we've lost something! «Oh, I only threw some tangerine peel out of the window, so there's no need for us to turn back,» I

reply jocularly. All of a sudden there is growling and rumbling, raving and ranting inside the jeep. The passengers are talking agitatedly to each other, gesticulating and shouting at me. I do not understand a word. Finally, the three young men with whom I share the first row of backseats rustle up some words in English and tell me vehemently that passengers under no circumstances should throw anything out of the window of a vehicle. I stammer something about it being «organic waste» and «anyway, in India...», but then I realise that the matter is dead serious and it would be wiser to keep my beak buttoned.

«We were caught red-handed, caught in the act,» the driver says, «and the gentlemen are very upset. But they're letting you go because you're a guest in our country.» I stammer a weak «thank



you». He starts the engine and we set off again. I try my darnedest to hide how stupid I'm feeling – and how profoundly misunderstood. I think about how careful I usually am with my rubbish in India, even when I see everybody else just dumping their garbage on the street or chucking it into the bushes – whether they are footing it around or riding in a bus. But it's of no use, sometimes you simply do not get the chance to justify your actions. Anyway, at the moment, my view is split into two by the backpack resting on my knees. On the right, through the scratched window-pane I can see a narrow valley lined with a row of power plants. In the waning daylight, the landscape is getting more and more dusty with every passing minute. On the left, I can see the filigreed neck of a young woman wearing her black hair in a top-knot. She is sitting in front with her legs guarding my travel bag, which is squeezed in below them. The woman is about 25 or 30 years old – but (after me) she's the oldest on board. In her lap is a plastic bag of pink cotton candy. Now and then she sucks on a corner of the

plastic. Perhaps she is taking the cotton candy to her child, and taking a wee taste of it en route. Shortly after we pass Mabong, while I'm pondering over my faux pas with the tangerine peel, she turns her head towards me. She has a strikingly pure, beautiful face with bulging eyes. She looks straight at me without smiling, without saying a word. I wish there was some solidarity, better still a hint of complicity, in her eyes, but there is none. After a few seconds, she turns her face away.

Shortly before Legship, two schoolgirls in the backseat strike up a conversation with me. Of course, they ask me where I'm from. They are pleased with my answer. «Switzerland must be a very clean place,» they say, that's what their teacher had told them. «No, it's not all that clean», I reply, your teacher is probably mistaken. They giggle at the idea that their schoolteacher's world view could be inaccurate. And I realise once again that you mostly first make an ass of yourself in front of yourself.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.